

## HER EASTER OFFERING.

BY G. E. CHITTENDEN.



It was the Wednesday before Easter. In a certain beautiful city church, called Saint Mark's, the morning service was drawing to a close. The rector read the last notice: "There will be an especial service for the children Sunday next, at three o'clock in the afternoon. Those who have offerings of flowers will please bring them to the chancel-railing, where I will receive them." The rector's dark eyes glanced over the large congregation.

In all that throng of people, there was no one he could call his own. He had lost both wife and child many years ago, and his was a lonely home.

His eyes wandered to the rectory-pew, and he observed with surprise that it was occupied. A little girl sat there, her whole attitude and expression denoting rapt attention, as she gazed up in his face.

When the service ended, the child whom the rector had noticed rose with the rest of the congregation—a poor child, wrapped in a faded green shawl, which had evidently made acquaintance with all kinds of weather. She walked hurriedly down the aisle, the people looking in surprise at the odd little figure as it went by. On reaching the pavement, she broke into a quick run. Through street after street she passed, never pausing until she reached a large greenhouse, where she stopped, breathless.

"Anyone can do it," she thought, unconsciously pressing her hand to her side to still the beating of her heart, caused partly by that rapid race, and partly by a vast idea which had entered her mind. "Those flowers is o' purpose to sell."

She drew out of her pocket a few pennies, and fell to counting them. "One—two—three and five makes eight." It seemed a good deal of money. "Maybe 'twouldn't be so much," she thought.

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Pushing the door open, she stepped within the sweet damp air of the greenhouse. No one seemed to be there. She walked slowly down one flower-lined aisle and up another, when suddenly she stopped before a cluster of great white flowers growing at the top of a long green stalk. She stood looking at them—motionless, entranced by their wondrous beauty, and dreaming a bright day-dream, from which she was rudely awakened by a rough voice close beside her, saying:

"Say, youngster—what 'you doin'? Be off now! You're not wanted here!"

Startled, she turned to obey; but, remembering the riches in her pocket, she stopped and asked timidly:

"Say, mister—is them to sell?"

"Of course they're for sale! Come now—run along! I can't bother with you."

But the child stood her ground.

"I'm going," she said. "But won't you please to tell me what those are, and how much you sell 'em for?"

"What on earth do you want to know for?" asked the young fellow, impatiently. "They're Easter lilies—that's what they are! And that stalk you're a-looking at is worth one dollar. Any other information I could oblige you with?"

"Easter lilies?" repeated the child, her pale face flushing almost painfully. "They must be o' purpose. Say, mister—I'm just going. But won't you please to tell me—would they do for a noffering?"

The man was growing angry. This was by no means the kind of a customer by whom he cared to be detained from his dinner.

"See here, young woman," he said, taking off one coat and putting on another, while he looked coolly into the excited face before him: "will you clear out of this by your unassisted effort, or shall I help you off the premises?"

Understanding that the words were unfriendly, and that she was not likely to obtain any further information here, with one long lingering look into the hearts of the beautiful flowers, she went reluctantly away.

In a short time, she was entering a small upper room in a large tenement-house, the place she called home.

A young woman, with troubled, rather hard-

featured face, sat by the window, sewing. She did not look up or speak to the little girl, who glanced at her somewhat apprehensively before seating herself quietly on the floor at the opposite side of the room.

"I guess she feels cranky," thought the child. "What a pity!"

Then she said timidly:

"Polly."

No answer.

"Polly!"

"Well?" with a twitch of the thread that broke it off short and let all the gathers out.

"Polly, what is a noffering?"

"A what? Don't bother me with questions, Lil—I haven't no time."

"No; but, Polly, do please to tell me one thing I want to know just awful: Would Easter lilies—big white ones, with yellor to the middle—would they do for a noffering?"

"An offering? Where?" a little more crossly than before. Still, it was something gained for her to talk at all, and Lil felt encouraged.

"Over to the big church. Oh, Polly!" clasping her hands and looking up dreamily, "there's a glass winder, you know, all colors, where the light comes through kind of soft; and a man tells you things—about Someone that loves you. I don't just understand—but loves you like anything; and it's for Him you bring the noffering. And oh, Polly! the man is all dressed in white, and has such a look to his face—I can't tell you, but it seemed to shine. Then there's music; and anyone can do it, Polly. Anyone who brings a noffering of flowers, he said, could go right up near to the big winder and hand it to him. You could, you know, Polly, or me. And you could get 'em for a dollar—if they would do. Would they, Polly? Easter lilies, he said; all white, only yellor to the middle."

"Mercy on me, child!" exclaimed Polly, dropping her work and staring at Lil, as she sat, with tightly-clasped hands and quick-drawn breath, gazing at her. "I never knew you say so much to once, I give you my word. The man you heard was a clergyman: they always dress like that; and he wants flowers, next Sunday, to trim his church up with: they always do it once a year. But la, child! them people has got any amount of money to spend on foolishness. Folks like you and me can't do those kind of things; so don't you think nothin' about it. A dollar indeed!" And Polly went on sewing, as if there were no more to be said.

Lil sat motionless, all the light gone from her face. She did not cry; children so used

to disappointment as she do not cry easily. Polly would not help her, that was evident; and Polly was the kindest friend she had in the world.

When her mother died, over a year before, and she was left alone, Polly had given her a home, provided she could earn money for food and clothes. It required all Polly's strength and energy to pay for that little room and keep soul and body together.

As Lil sat there, her thoughts still intent on the service she had heard that day, and the pure white lilies, the strength of a great resolve entered in and took possession of her.

"I'll do it!" she thought, resolutely. "I ain't so greedy but what I can go without eatin' for awhile, I guess."

Easter Sunday dawned bright and clear. The children belonging to Saint Mark's Sunday-school waited impatiently till three o'clock—the time for their own especial service—arrived; then they flocked into the church, in their bright dresses and flower-trimmed hats.

The organ played softly, as they went up the aisle in groups of two and three, and handed their flowers to the rector, waiting behind the chancel-railing to receive them. Baskets, crowns, wreaths, great snowy clusters—he took them, one by one, with a smile the little ones loved.

Suddenly, he noticed that a knot of children who had just turned away stopped, as if surprised, and then went on whispering together. An advancing group glanced over their shoulders, then gazed at each other with astonished smiles, and some with little shrugs of contempt.

Looking beyond, the rector saw, coming up the aisle, the cause of so much wonderment—a shabby little figure, wrapped in a faded green shawl, regarding him with steadfast gaze, and bearing a stalk of Easter lilies in her hand. As she drew nearer, he saw that her face was wan and pinched, and the great intense eyes hollow and sunken.

Of all the beautiful offerings that had been handed him over the chancel-rail, that day, no other was received with so gentle and sweet a smile as the single stalk of Easter lilies taken from those small trembling fingers.

The smile sank deep into the child's heart, and rested there. Someone showed her a seat. The service commenced. Lil sat in a trance of happiness. She was not hungry now. She had fallen once on her way to the church and hurt her head; but she hardly felt the throbbing, and her offering had not been injured at all—she had saved it; she could see it now, shining pure and white among the other blossoms.

Listen! what was being said? How hard it was to keep awake! The music again; it pealed forth, and seemed to float through the perfumed air. Her eyelids closed, and the heavy head sank back against the cushioned seat.

The rector, coming into the body of the church on his way out, saw a number of persons collected about the pew-door, and observed that the bending faces had a frightened pitying look.

"Is anyone ill?" he asked.

"A little girl has fainted, sir," answered a boy, with an awed look on his bright countenance.

"Yes? Who is she?"

The children made way for the clergyman, and, in another moment, he was looking down at a little pinched face, pitifully white, with closed eyes and a happy smile on the still lips. A physician bent over her, his fingers on her wrist.

The rector's heart thrilled with pity.

"Doctor," he said, quickly, "is she—"

"No," returned the kindly physician, "I think not, but I fear—"

The bright-faced boy fell to crying quietly. There were but few dry eyes among them all.

The clergyman lifted the small wasted figure in his arms.

"I will take her to the rectory till she recovers," he said, simply.

Late that night, Lil lay in such a bed as she had never even dreamed of; but she could not realize the comfort of it, nor could the great staring eyes take in the beauty of the large well-ordered room. The blow she had received, together with her long fast, had proved too much for the weak little frame to endure, and Lil was very ill.

The night-lamp burned low. The housekeeper sat dozing in an arm-chair by the fire.

Below, in his study, the rector was pacing thoughtfully up and down, when he was startled by the sharp ringing of the bell. Going to the door, he threw it open. A young woman stood there; a young woman with an anxious, hard-featured face, as he could see when she stepped into the lighted hall.

She looked about as if searching for something.

"Can I do anything for you?" the gentleman asked, kindly.

"I know I hadn't ought to come disturbing you so late at night, sir," she said; "but I was told, a while ago, that a little girl as took some flowers to your church to-day—" she stopped, caught her breath slightly, then went on: "and died there! and you brought her here, and—" she continued, more hurriedly: "I wanted to say that she kinder belongs to me, and I'll do for her if you'll give her to me."

"My good girl," said the rector, gently, "she is not dead—poor little thing; we may save her yet. Is she your sister?"

Polly looked at him fixedly for a moment; then the hard face changed and softened, and, burying her face in her shawl, she burst into tears, a mode of relief for which she had little leisure.

"No, sir," she sobbed; "but, when her mother died, I gave her part of my room, for she hadn't no place to sleep; but I didn't give her nothin' to eat—she earnt that. She went up to your church last Wednesday, and heard about bringin' flowers, come Sunday. She seemed possessed about it. I thought it was foolishness, and wouldn't help her; but she saved up the money, and—I never gave her a bite. I wish I had-of, but I thought I'd get her sick of it. She couldn't have eaten enough to keep a fly alive the last three or four days, and I wish—I wish—" The thick-coming sobs choked Polly, and she stopped.

The rector laid his hand on her shoulder.

"My good girl," he said, huskily, "try to control yourself. We may save the dear child, and cause her Easter offering to be a means of blessing to her and to us all. I wish you would stay and help us nurse her; will you not?"

So, when reason returned to Lil, and she opened her eyes and looked about in pleased wonder, they met two familiar faces; she saw Polly, the kindest friend she had ever known; and the rector, with that loving smile on his lips, and his dark eyes shining through a mist as he came forward, bent and touched her forehead with his lips.

A year has passed since Lil received that kiss; she lives at the rectory now, a beautiful guarded life, and the rector calls her his "Easter Lily."


## LIFE'S HARVEST.

It is not just as we take it,  
This mystical life of ours;

Life's field will yield just as we make it,  
A harvest of thorns or flowers.

## WHAT STOOD BETWEEN.

BY FRANK LEE BENEDICT.

HE morning had been bright enough for a poet to sing about, if there was one left who possessed the sublime fatuity to believe he could find a new rhyme or simile for "bonny spring." It was getting late in the afternoon now, and the day had changed as suddenly as the temper of most human beings has a trick of doing, and with as little apparent reason. The air was almost oppressively warm, but the sky had turned so sullen and gray that it looked as chill as if November had fathered it. Evidently, a storm was lurking somewhere near the horizon, and proposed to make itself visible before many hours.

Miriam Clifford sat in a solitary spot among the shrubberies, with her eyes fixed on a book. Suddenly, a half-dozen crows flew overhead, swooping low as they passed, and giving a simultaneous and prolonged caw of the most dolorous character. Miriam dropped the volume on the bench and looked up.

"Good gracious!" was her mental comment; "none but nineteenth-century crows, afflicted with pessimistic views of life, could have contrived a sound so exasperatingly hopeless."

She half laughed at her own poor witticism, then glanced down at the book by her side, and gave it an impatient push. For nearly an hour she had cheated herself into the belief that she was reading; but she perceived now that, though she had turned the pages at intervals, she possessed no more knowledge of their contents than of some conversation going on in Tartary or Japan.

She rose, walked to and fro along the path several times, then stopped to pick up her book, meaning to go to the house. She recollected that her hair was hanging down in a manner more picturesque than dignified. Her head had ached all the morning, and she had taken advantage of her solitude to enjoy the relief of freedom from combs and pins; but she must put her rebellious locks in order before her sister-in-law and her guest returned from their drive.

A faint repetition of the doleful caw struck her ear, and, though the distance softened its

irritating sharpness, it sounded more despairing than ever.

Mrs. Clifford leaned one hand on the back of the bench, and, shading her eyes with the other, stood gazing after the westward-flying birds and thinking a dozen half-complete thoughts at once, a habit common to many ill-regulated minds.

Pierce Levison came strolling along, and, catching sight of her, stopped to admire the pose of the graceful figure, the beauty of the hands and arms, and the wistful dreamy face which he only saw in profile, framed in a long scarf flung over the dark masses of loose floating hair.

For a few instants he feasted his eyes, then a fierce impatience seized him to say out all that was burning his heart—all which he had, this afternoon, determined to utter, in spite of any feminine adroitness at checking or evading direct revelations and replies.

He hurried forward, the grass deadening his steps, so that, in her absorption, Miriam did not hear his approach, and called suddenly:

"Will it be favorable if they keep straight on? You look like a sybil watching the birds for an answer to some important question. There—they turn to the left: is the omen good?"

Mrs. Clifford dropped her hands and glanced toward the intruder, saying with a mischievous smile, which, pretty as it was, seemed a little out of keeping with the melancholy expression in her eyes:

"You need sadly to review your Roman history. You are confusing the Sybils with the Augurs—who, being men, had to build predictions on the flights of birds, instead of pouring out inspired warnings in verse."

"Heavens, what long words and what wisdom! Have you been reading Tacitus?" he asked, pointing to the book.

"Nothing more formidable than a novel: you see I have not forgotten all my school-studies," she replied, taking the volume as she spoke.

"Please don't go indoors," he urged. "Sit down and let us talk comfortably here."

Mrs. Clifford hesitated for an instant, the first glance at his countenance having warned her that he had come armed with a resolution from which it would be difficult to make him swerve.

But, after all, it was cowardly on her part to try to put off an inevitable combat—for the interview must amount to this: and, though she felt certain of her own determination, she knew that her heart would fight on his side.

"If I am only allowed to be comfortable, I don't much mind where it is; this heavy atmosphere makes me disgracefully lazy," she said, as she seated herself.

He stood before her, tall and erect; his face was fine, rather than handsome, but the regular features were saved from any approach to severity by the peculiar softness of the hazel eyes. Better than all, he looked what he was—a man of clear broad intellect, and a thorough gentleman.

Mrs. Clifford had been a widow for more than four years. She had, a good while since, laid aside her mourning, and lived among gay people. But, though she did this, it was generally understood that she meant never to marry again, and, while possessing many admirers, she had always found it easy to get rid of those who grew troublesome, with the exception of Pierce Levison.

From the time Miriam began to receive her friends again, she had passed few days unenlivened by Levison's society. Often for weeks they had been domiciled under the same roof, when paying visits to mutual friends, or when he came in the summer to stay at the old country-seat, where she and her sister-in-law lived together.

This last winter, the two had, according to their habit, spent in New York, but had come away much earlier than usual, as Miss Clifford was sorely exercised about a new barn she was building, and a couple of small farms of which she had decided to dispose, as they were, to quote her own words, "not only an endless plague, but an aggravating expense."

Having treated Levison like a spoiled younger brother since he was a boy, Miss Pleasant never scrupled to demand his assistance and advice. She had required both in her present worries; at least, these latter had given her an excuse to send for him. He had obeyed her request with alacrity, and had been for several days stopping in the house.

He was called away now; the summons had only reached him this morning, and, as yet, Miriam had not heard of it. He must go; but, before he went, the wearing suspense of long months should find a culmination.

After regarding for some time in silence Mrs. Clifford's half averted countenance, he said abruptly:

"I suppose you meant the first part of your sentence as a warning. Now, I don't want to disturb your comfort, but I have something to say, and I must say it—you know pretty well, too, what it is!"

"Please don't!" she exclaimed. "It can't do any good—it will only distress us both—and—and—"

"I am obliged to go to France about my sister-in-law's estate, and the business my brother left in Algiers," he went on, as her sentence died away unfinished. "I must sail immediately; I have just received the answer to my last letter."

He saw an expression of relief cross Miriam's features; saw it succeeded by one of regret—he could read that face so clearly!

"It is really very sudden, after all," she said, hurriedly, "though for weeks you have expected you would be obliged to go."

"You are glad, and you are sorry!" he exclaimed. "Oh, Miriam, be one or the other outright."

"I shall miss you," she replied; "miss you sadly."

"Well, you could not easily say less about any person you call a friend," he rejoined; "but I want more than that! Miriam, you know I love you—that you are all the world to me, and have been for years—"

"I don't want to know it!" she interrupted, with a sob in her voice. "It must not be so—I have told you over and over!"

"Yes, but your saying it has changed nothing," he rejoined. "You have never admitted that you care for me—I mean, love me. Yet I feel that you do! Oh, this sounds terribly conceited, but it is true—it is true!"

"If it were, that could do no good," she said, slowly, growing somewhat pale, and letting her hands fall wearily in her lap. "Why repeat what can only give us both pain? You know that I cannot break my promise to a dying man."

"You gave no definite promise," Levison said, firmly. "You had no idea to what you were about to consent—"

"I said I would promise anything he might ask—anything!" she broke in, with sudden impetuosity.

"Exactly; as one tells a sick person whatever will most quickly quiet his nervous excitement," returned Levison. "A vow implies, in its very spirit, that the one who makes it must clearly understand its import! You did not think at all; you hardly knew what you were saying, and you had not the slightest hint what use would be made of your words. Therefore, no

legal or moral law could hold you bound; more, there is none that would admit your speech to be a pledge."

"I must! I must!" she cried, with a sort of desperation in her voice and look, in itself an avowal of the force with which her heart fought against her resolve. "Oh, if that moment were to live over, I should say as I did then; so would anybody under the same circumstances—you yourself! You could not refrain when the person pleading loved you better than all the world—and was dying!"

"I should give no definite pledge," Levison rejoined, quietly. "I do not believe it right for the dying to ask any, where the future of those left here on earth is concerned. I do not say this merely from personal feeling—it has always been my creed."

"I know! I know!" she faltered.

"Christianity teaches us to hope that our lost friends go away to a higher existence," continued Levison: "why should they want to fetter those left behind? Such exigencies might arrive that to keep a promise to the dying would wreck the happiness of the person who made the vow, and that of others beside. Surely, if those gone out of this world can look back, they would suffer terrible regret to know that their selfishness had blighted the existence of loved ones on this earth."

"Yet—yet—"

"But these arguments are not needed in your case," Levison went steadily on. "You gave no definite pledge, so you are not bound."

"Oh, that is mere sophistry," she cried, almost fretfully.

"No: it is reason and common-sense," he replied; "and what irritates you is the fact that, down at the bottom, you know it is. Oh, Miriam, use your judgment! Look at the matter with your intellect, not merely from the side of sentiment and morbid feeling!"

"I see how it must appear to you," she sighed. "I own that I regard the matter very differently from the way in which I viewed it four years ago; but the fact confronts me still. I cannot stir from the strict letter of my words. I said I would promise anything—everything. I cannot break my word."

"But you don't scruple to break my heart!" Levison cried, passionately.

"Ah, don't say that—you must not!" she pleaded. "I warned you from the first; you knew I could never be more to you than a faithful friend."

"I beg your pardon—I am ashamed," he

cried. "Nothing could be more selfish than that speech of mine. But oh, Miriam—I love you! I could make you happy; and you let what is worse than a superstition—what is the tyranny of the dead—stand between us."

"I think you have no reason to reproach me: I have never varied," she answered, gently. His eyes met hers with such infinite tenderness, that her heart throbbed almost to suffocation under the spell of that glance; but she went steadily on: "I have done nothing, said nothing, which can give you reason to decide that my personal feelings—"

"Oh, I understand," he interrupted: "you will not own that you care for me; but you cannot deny it—you are too truthful, too brave. And you know I do not speak from any miserable vanity—you do me that justice."

"No man was ever freer from such weakness," she said, as hotly as if some third person had insinuated a charge against her friend. "But oh, let us stop—words can avail nothing. Let the subject end, now and forever. I promised—I promised!"

He walked abruptly away and took several turns up and down the path, while Miriam sat staring straight before her, hearing the sound of his steps on the gravel, and, in between, the echo of that long-dead voice crying imperiously: "You have promised—you have promised!"

Scene after scene in her married life passed like some ghostly panorama before her eyes, as if invisible powers were struggling to influence her—some on one side, some on the other.

She had been barely eighteen when she married Lester Clifford, and he not yet four-and-twenty. He had adored her from childhood, and she could hardly remember when she had not heard the elders in both families talk of their future marriage almost as a matter of course. When Lester caught that dreadful cold and it was decided—merely as a precaution—that he should go to spend the winter in Bermuda, he had utterly refused, unless Miriam would accompany him. So their wedding proved a very hurried affair; and they sailed away to the sunny clime, taking love and happiness with them.

When they returned, in the spring, Lester's health appeared thoroughly re-established; but the unconscious tyranny which he had exercised during those first months had grown his fixed habit. For several years, Miriam shut her eyes to the fact that she had married a thoroughly selfish man—a very weak nature, too—one of those persons whose early youth seems full

of brilliant possibilities, none of which ever fulfill themselves.

Then, during the last two years of his life, Clifford's health failed; at one time, he seemed attacked by galloping consumption, but got better, and the doctors decided he might live for a good while, though he could never be well. Of course, Miriam was wholly devoted to the care of her husband. Only those who have watched another suffer, or have themselves borne the tyranny of a selfish invalid, can imagine what she endured. Yet the fear of losing him kept her love fresh, and to be able to gratify his every wish at any cost was her sole desire. Occasionally, he would develop a frantic jealousy of everybody about, even of his own sister; and though, when he recovered from the attack, he invariably repented the passionate reproaches he had heaped on Miriam, at the time only complete submission could restore him to composure.

It was in one of these spasms of hysteria, coming, too, during a sudden relapse, such as every now and then frightened his nurses, that he had said to Miriam:

"I want you to make me a promise." She begged to hear what it might be, but he only reiterated: "You must give your word first—you would if you loved me—I ask that proof—nothing less will satisfy me!"

She told him that, no matter what he might ask, she promised to obey his wish, and only smiled when informed that she had given a pledge never to marry again.

He went fast to sleep, and, when he woke, was feeling better again, and did not recur to the subject.

During some weeks, he seemed steadily to improve. They were staying at a house his sister owned among the New Hampshire hills. Business of importance in New York unexpectedly required immediate care. Lester could not stand the journey and the excitement; he gave Miriam full powers, and she went herself to arrange the matter, in which a good deal of her own money and his was involved.

She was gone a week; he grew worse during her absence, but nobody felt alarmed, and he refused to let her be sent for, saying to his sister:

"I begin to see how selfish I have been—I wish—I wish—still, I loved her—I did love her."

This broken acknowledgment was a comfort to Miriam when Pleasant Clifford repeated it. Lester only lived a few days after his wife's return, and could talk little during the time,

though his gentleness and patience were sweet to remember. Again the ring of Levison's heel on the gravel brought Miriam back to the present. He returned as abruptly as he had moved away, and stood directly before her, saying:

"You will not admit that you love me—you do not deny it! At least, say this—if he were alive and you at liberty, would you marry him or me?"

Her heart answered without hesitation. She did not run away or take refuge in a falsehood, as a weaker woman might have done. She looked full in her lover's eyes, and said firmly:

"I would marry you."

"Miriam—Miriam!" he cried, rapturously, while a great joy transfigured his face.

He made a step forward with extended arms, but she stopped him by a quick gesture.

"Miriam!" he repeated. "At last!"

"Hush!" she said, sternly. "Do you not understand? That I have the courage to tell you this, is a proof that I shall have the courage to keep my promise."

"Oh, you are pitiless to us both!" he exclaimed, momentarily losing self-command, under the revulsion of feeling and the horrible agony roused by her words. "It is wrong—wicked—it is absolute insanity! You can't do it—you shall not! Oh, if there were justice anywhere, the very dead would come back to appeal against your decision."

"Pierce—Pierce!"

"Yes—I know—I am talking like a brute! But it is all true—every word!" he groaned.

He sank on his knees and caught her hands; he pleaded for his happiness and hers in words of burning eloquence; but, though her anguish equaled his own, she held firm through the double ordeal of his prayers and the struggles of her own heart.

"You only hurt us both," she urged, when she could speak. "This is useless—useless! Stop, Pierce, stop!"

He rose and stood looking searchingly down at her. She was white as death, and her great eyes were dilated with pain; but the face, even amid its misery, wore an expression of unalterable resolve.

"I will stop," he said. "I beg your pardon! A little more or less suffering to me is of no consequence, but I am sorry to have hurt you! It was very selfish of me, and, as you say—'useless—useless!'"

For the first time, tears filled Miriam's eyes, and she sobbed. "Oh, try to forgive me! Indeed, indeed, I want to do right!"

"I know," he answered; "don't cry—that

is worse than reproaches! Of course, you mean to do right! Oh, those words—right and duty—how much horrible wrong has been done in their names! But there, I won't grow rhetorical—I shan't tease you any more, Miriam."

"You are so good—so generous. Oh, believe that I appreciate it!" she cried. "And we are to be friends still?"

"Of course, friends—and half a world between us," he replied, with a bitter laugh.

"But you will not be gone for very long—and you will write to me?"

"No; I shall not write," he said, quietly. "Of what use, to harrow up my own feelings—feed my sorrow? No, I won't write—at least, not soon. As for coming back—why should I? If you ever want me to come, a word will bring me if I am at the end of the earth! I shall never change—you know that! But you will not change either; you are held by the fetters of your heathen superstition—ah, I am growing petty and rude again!"

"I would give an eternity of happiness to ease your pain—"

"All but one thing you would do," he interrupted; "and it is only that which could help me. Let us walk a little—it will be for the last time. Ah, here comes your sister-in-law! Perhaps it is just as well—we had nothing more to say. This is the real good-bye, you know."

"Only forgive me; at least, admit you understand and do justice to the motive which actuates me. I promised; I must keep my word. If he could come back—if I could explain, ask for release—" She broke off, with a movement of wild impatience. "Oh, it all sounds so insane! But you understand!"

"And I submit, as every human being must, to the inevitable; but submission does not imply faith that the wrong one suffers is right," he said, slowly. "Do not talk about forgiveness—I am not angry; I pity you as I pity the unfortunates one reads of in history—forced to condemn their own children to death, to believe some one beloved a castaway. Your creed is all part of those horrible superstitions. I know you suffer; well, remember always that there is another who suffers also."

Miriam turned hurriedly, passed her sister-in-law with some broken excuse about going to dress, and disappeared. Miss Clifford—a middle-aged woman, whose plain features were rendered fairly handsome by an expression of goodness and cultivation—walked up to Levison and laid her hand on his shoulder, saying gently:

"It was of no use—but sometime, perhaps."

"No," he answered; "it is all over; she cannot change. She is bound and fettered, and no human power can break her bonds."

The next day, Pierce Levison was gone.

Miriam had known that she must miss him terribly; but, though her heart for many months had acknowledged his supremacy, she did not realize what a necessity his companionship had grown until she so suddenly found herself deprived thereof.

No man ever possessed a more ardent champion than Levison had owned in Miss Pleasant from the moment she discovered his secret—which had been almost as soon as he became himself aware of it.

The spinster rated her dead brother at his just value, and loved his widow better than any other human being. She was indignant with Miriam for letting Pierce go away without a ray of hope, and heartily sorry for her at the same time.

"You are wrong, wrong—all wrong!" she said. "But I might wear myself to an echo chanting that, and it would serve no purpose whatever."

"At least, you believe that I want to do right," Miriam began; "that I think duty—"

"Good heavens, yes!" interrupted Miss Pleasant. "And you believe you are doing it; that's what makes the matter hopeless."

"I must obey my conscience; I could not live if I were to allow myself to be persuaded to violate its dictates," Miriam said.

"Just so!" ejaculated Miss Pleasant. "Conscience! You are influenced by the same feeling that countless women have been, when they beggared themselves to help a worthless father or brother. Duty! Under that name, countless other women have borne tortures worse than those of the rack, rather than break loose from husbands who were demons, not men! I could cite examples for a week, but I should only waste my breath. You insist on remaining blind!"

"Oh, Pleasant!"

"Well, well—I retract that word," rejoined Miss Clifford. "You are blind, I will say—of course, you are not to be blamed—yes, you are, though. The man who has a cataract and won't allow it removed, is to blame."

"But, my dear," said Miriam, laughing, though her features worked with pain, "I have tried to accept all the arguments brought to bear on me—the surgeon's knife, we will call them—but the trial has failed."

"Humph!" said Miss Pleasant, rubbing her



nose vindictively. "Don't force me to quote 'None are so blind as those who—' There, there—I didn't mean that. You're one of the best women in the world, and I'd like to see you happy."

"I could not be, in acting against my own conscience," Miriam said. "Oh, I have tried—I— Ah, Pleasant, let us leave the subject here; help me to forget—it is all you can do."

She kissed her sister-in-law's forehead and went out of the room, leaving Miss Pleasant nearer tears than often happened.

"It's no use to torment the poor child," she thought. "I am sorry for them both; but there's nothing to be done. They were meant for each other. Oh, the muddle this world is! Why can't she comprehend that agreeing in a moment of excitement to do—she did not know what—was no promise at all. Anyway, I wish promises could be abolished; and as for consciences—well, bad folk pay no attention, and good people use theirs to torment themselves and others: so the organ might as well be abolished also."

The days, the weeks, and the months went on, and, in spite of heartache, internal conflicts, and weariness, Miriam managed to support life with reasonable cheerfulness, as did Pierce Levison in his exile—as we all must, unless we are willing to make ourselves utter nuisances to everybody about and render our own burdens still harder to bear.

Levison had been gone over a year before Miriam received any personal token of recognition, though she had frequently heard of his whereabouts and doings through the medium of mutual friends, and a few times he had written to Miss Pleasant; but that lady was a poor correspondent.

Again Levison wrote to the spinster, and, by the same steamer, forwarded to Miriam a quantity of curiosities which he had picked up during a season of rambling through Algiers. She at once sent him a letter of thanks, and he replied, giving a great many details about people and places, but speaking little of his personal feelings. He had taken his late brother's business on his shoulders, and was carrying it through successfully. When he would be able to delegate it to others, he could not yet tell; perhaps for several years he might be obliged to divide his time between France and Algiers.

"He will end by marrying that yellow-haired, caressing, helpless little sister-in-law of his," Miss Pleasant informed an invisible familiar with whom she often conversed when alone. "That's

the way things go, in this world—just dawdle on from one hopeless muddle to another; I shall turn Nihilist yet—I know I shall."

Another summer passed, and, toward the end of September, Miss Pleasant found it necessary to make a journey; and, as she knew that it would be painful for Miriam to accompany her, she insisted on going alone. The house in New Hampshire, where Lester Clifford had died, still belonged to Miss Clifford. Neither she nor Miriam had ever been there since Lester's death, and now there was an opportunity to sell the place, which had only been an incumbrance to her for a long while.

Among the furniture, there were articles she wanted to keep, and, into the bargain, the details of the sale could be more speedily settled if she were on the spot; so she had a trunk packed, and started with the promptitude which characterized all her proceedings.

Miss Clifford had been gone a week. She wrote that she had finished the entire business, and might reach home the day after the arrival of her letter—she had not quite decided. She had some thoughts of visiting her old friend, Mrs. Crawley, in Berkshire. If she concluded to do so, Miriam must join her there—they had both owed the visit too long already. She sent also a trunk, the contents of which she asked Miriam to examine.

"It is full of your and Lester's old papers," she wrote; "I did not feel at liberty to meddle with them, else I might have saved you that most doleful of all tasks. I would say burn the whole unlooked at, only I think the certificates of those stocks we have had so much bother over are among them. It never occurred to me until I saw the box; I had forgotten about its being there, as I dare say you had too."

When Miriam went upstairs, she found the trunk in her dressing-room, where she had ordered it put. Her first impulse was to open it at once and finish the painful duty without delay; but, feeling somewhat tired after a long walk, she decided to wait till the next day. As she told herself afterward, in the first madness of the affliction which was drawing so near, fate made her postpone the work until its accomplishment could add another pang to her misery.

She felt in unusually good spirits: for she was a very melancholy person under the persistently cheerful front which she showed even to her intimates. But, all this bright day, she had been able to enjoy the sunshine, shut her eyes to the terrible emptiness of human life and hopes, and enjoy the society of some young

people in the neighborhood, who had persuaded her to join them in a ramble over the hills.

While she was still looking at the box, her maid came to announce a call from the rector and his wife. She went downstairs, and spent another pleasant half-hour, charming her visitors by her winning manner and her delightful conversation.

"I never saw her in such spirits," the clergyman said to his companion, as they walked down the avenue. "She is always cheerful; but, to-day, she was as bright and gay as a girl—fairly looked like one, too."

The pair met a boy from the telegraph-office in the village, going toward the house, and seeing him afforded a text for the rector on which to enlarge concerning the marvelous inventions of our century, to which we have grown so accustomed that we give them as little reflection as we do the commonest, most prosaic details of daily existence.

After her guests' departure, Miriam went out into the shrubberies and seated herself on the bench where she had held her last conversation with Pierce Levison. Usually, this was a spot she avoided; but to-day the pain, always making itself felt at her heart, had so lifted, that a sort of sweet melancholy took its place.

It was there a servant found her. He handed her the telegram and bowed himself off. Miriam knew what it was—an answer to a dispatch she had that morning sent to a gentleman in New York, who was her lawyer and intimate friend. She put the envelope in her pocket and went on dreaming.

At length, she recollected that this self-indulgence would have to be paid for by keen suffering—let her come back to reality and common-sense. She drew out the telegram, opened the envelope, unfolded the yellow paper, and read:

"Insurance due on Saturday Will arrange Pierce Levison died here to-day."

The lines, written without punctuation, jumbled themselves strangely before her eyes. She actually read the message twice before she could take in its meaning.

Died here—the syllables were plain; she understood them—died! A deep muffled voice seemed to repeat the word over and over in her ear. Then, for a time, everything grew dark about her—she sitting erect and rigid; she knew she did not faint, for she could hear the voice still reiterating its monotonous chant—died here—died!

When the blindness left her, and she again looked about, the last rays of the sunset were

staining the tree-trunks a dull-red; she dragged herself slowly back to the house.

"It is not true," she heard somebody say, and cried out in response: "I knew it was not—I knew it!"

Then she realized that she was answering her own unconscious speech, and wondered if she were going mad. Presently, she found herself seated in the library, writing a message to Mr. Denton, to question him about his telegram. After finishing the lines, she recollected that he must have already left his office, so she altered the address to his private residence. She wrote slowly and with great care, all the while wondering in a confused way why she could not hurry. She rang the bell, and ordered the dispatch to be sent at once.

She glanced at the clock—it was just six: in two hours, she could have a reply. Two hours? Two centuries! But, at the expiration of that interminable waiting, she should hear there had been a mistake.

The butler summoned her to her solitary dinner; but she went to her own rooms instead, giving orders that she should not be disturbed until the telegram came.

"It is not true," she kept repeating, as she walked up and down; "it is not true."

She must not believe the horrible tidings; if she permitted herself to, she should go crazy. But there was no need to do either; the end of this awful suspense would be the assurance that an error had been made—somewhere—by somebody.

Seven o'clock—eight—a half-hour more; then a period that was like eternity!

She had no light; the curtains were drawn away from the windows, and the full moon streamed in. By its radiance, she could see the clock on the mantel in her dressing-room; it was nearly nine.

She hurried out into the hall, and started down the stairs; near the foot, she met a servant bringing the telegram. She took the missive and walked back—moving very slowly now. She paused under the hall chandelier and opened the envelope.

Her own dispatch had asked: "Are you certain of news about Pierce Levison?" This was the answer: "Certain Is in evening papers."

Miriam got into her room, mechanically locking the door behind her. When midnight struck, she was still sitting huddled in a heap on the floor, just as she had sunk down when she entered. During all that time, there had not been one instant of blessed unconsciousness.

Nobody had come near, for her maid that morning had asked permission to spend the evening out.

Miriam rose and began to walk about. She saw the box standing in the corner: the sight of it suggested an idea—occupation was what she wanted—that, or to rush out into the night and run till her strength should fail, and she fall down insensible or dead.

But death did not come at a poor human being's summons. Pierce was dead; she must live—that was her doom—to live!

Those papers—she would examine them. She opened her writing-desk and took out a little bunch of keys—one of them fitted the lock of the trunk. She shut out the moon, lighted a lamp, and began her work. She was not suffering; she felt cold—stony; but she told herself that she was too hard and cruel to suffer! She had made Pierce suffer, but she—oh, no, she did not! She found numerous school-girl scribbles of her own, many letters, old diaries of her husband's, and at last she uncovered a book in which he had sometimes jotted down entries during the closing year of his life.

It was toward daylight when she chanced on this volume, and began turning over the leaves. The last bit of writing bore a date less than two weeks previous to his death; she remembered that was while she had been absent about the business matters which had troubled him.

Her eyes followed the faint irregular lines to the close, then went back over them again and again.

"I must tell Miriam as soon as she comes home—I have just remembered about it! I am ashamed of my conduct that day when I made her promise to grant whatever I might ask. It was ridiculous; but, of course, she knew it was only a sick man's half-crazy whim—it could have no weight with anybody—still, I must tell her—she is so morbidly conscientious!

"How selfish I have been—since she went away, I see it plainly for the first time! My noble generous Miriam—she has had a hard life! I want her to get all the good she can out of existence! Yes, I can almost hope she may find some man worthy of her—who—"

The record ended abruptly; there was a blot on the paper, as if the pen had fallen from the nerveless fingers.

The hand of the dead man had unlocked her fetters when it was too late! Pierce was dead also—Pierce, who, if she had so chosen, might be alive and beside her.

"He knows now," she muttered; "Lester has told him! But the dead don't care for things down here—the dead don't care!"

A sudden spasm of agony seized her—a sort of insanity full of despairing wrath. She ran up and down the rooms; she tugged at her hair, and drove the nails into the palms of her hands. She tried to shriek, to groan—she could not. Then she fell on the floor again, whispering:

"There is no help anywhere—no help—and the dead don't care—they don't care!"

If she could have found the writing years before! Oh, she had gone over that very diary, yet the page had been kept hidden from her eyes—it was fate's work! If, since it had lain so long unseen, she need never have discovered it! But no; fate would not even spare her this awful blow! It had been decreed that she was to read those lines on this night, of all the nights in her wretched maimed existence—her miserable failure of a life, without fruition—no hope realized—no wish granted! A specimen of the lives of all humanity. Oh, of all sentient creatures down to the lowest animal—the puniest insect—suffering—always suffering!

If she were to take matters in her own hands and thwart destiny by ending this dismal round of—

The very horror of her unfinished thought brought her back to sanity. She looked about; daylight was struggling through the curtains. She blew out the light, flung back the hangings, and opened the windows.

The breath of the soft October morning stole in; the late birds sang among the trees; the horizon began to show long lines of opal tints.

Miriam stood and watched the sun rise and flood earth and sky with sudden glory. Gradually a chill lethargy succeeded to her wild passion. She knew that she could neither die nor go wholly mad. She must live—live—so let her at once come back to the claims and trammels of daily existence. Her outcries and revilings were weak and childish. Pain must be borne; to cling fast to the old faith might at least lighten the load a little.

Mechanically she began her toilet, and was nearly dressed when her maid appeared, who, being a thoroughly phlegmatic person, incapable of perceiving that aught was amiss unless somebody chanced to fall dead before her eyes, arranged her mistress's hair and did not even notice that she looked different from her ordinary self.

It was nine o'clock before Miriam had decided on any step. She suddenly determined to go to New York. She must look at his face once more—she must!

There would be no train till midday. She walked about, she went indoors and out, and in

again; upstairs, then back to the library; then up to her room anew, and set herself to the work of arranging and rearranging the books and papers in the box.

"Dead—dead—dead!"

The words rang constantly in her ear—rose often to her lips.

She heard a carriage drive up; presently she heard persons speaking in the lower hall—surely one of the voices was Pleasant's! She opened her door and listened. Pleasant was saying to her maid: "Tell Mrs. Clifford I have come."

Miriam returned to her dressing-room, took Lester's diary from the table, silently passed the servant on the landing, and went downstairs. She crossed the corridor and entered the library, holding the book in her outstretched hand.

"Pleasant," she said, "see what I found last night! Lester set me free from my promise! I found this after I got the news of Pierce's death—did you know Pierce was dead?"

She tottered suddenly; she heard Pleasant shriek, then she was caught and held fast, but not in Pleasant's arms.

"Miriam! Miriam!"

It was Pierce Levison's voice that called—his heart that beat against her own.

The dispatch Mr. Denton sent had been scribbled in such haste, that his chirography, always the despair of correspondents, turned into hieroglyphs so mysterious they deceived even the practiced eye of the telegrapher.

The closing words of the message were meant to read: "Arrived here to-day."

## THE ROBIN'S RAIN-SONG.

BY MINNA IRVING.

THESE are silver pools in the garden-walks,  
And diamond drops in the bower,  
And the young green leaves and the withered stalks  
Are bathed in the crystal shower.  
At the purple plumes of the lilac-spray,  
I look through a jeweled pane,  
Where a robin sitteth the livelong day  
And singeth a song of rain.

To the farmer driving his oxen by  
He sings of the harvest yield,  
Of the corn, and the wheat, and the haystack high,  
And the cows in the daisied field;  
But to me, who gaze through a mist of tears,  
A sad and a sweet refrain,  
Set to the tune of the by-gone years,  
Is the robin's song in the rain.

For the gate is oped by the lilac-bush,  
And a fair little maid comes through  
And stops to hear in the twilight hush,  
Just as I used to do.  
I see the gleam of the golden hair,  
The neck in its slender chain,  
And the dainty skirts—that she lifts with care  
From the long grass wet with the rain.

But the gate, long since, to the flame was fed,  
And the lilac-bush has grown,  
And the little maid is as dead, as dead,  
As if under a church-yard stone;  
For here in her place is a woman old,  
Who thinks that she sees again  
The rosy face and the locks of gold,  
When the robin sings in the rain.

## BABY HAS GONE TO SCHOOL.

BY MRS. S. M. WRIGHT.

THE day has arrived at last, ah me!  
When the lessons learned at the mother's knee  
Must give place to the teacher's maxim and rule,  
So baby has marched away to school.  
The heart grows sad, and the tear-drops start,  
For it's one more step from the mother's heart.

The baby has gone, and a romping girl,  
In her seventh year, with fluff and curl,  
With her azure eyes and her laughing face,  
Has stealthily stolen the baby's place;  
And to-day we send her, with book and rule,  
To take her place in the public school.

How still is the house! what a settled gloom,  
As we wander around from room to room!  
How weary the hours! the day, how long,

With all of the noise and the racket gone!  
The quiet we longed for but yesterday  
Don't come, as we thought 'twould, with baby away.

Our thoughts wander off to the coming years,  
When the child of to-day a woman appears—  
To that day when fate, mingling joy with pain,  
Contents that "our loss is another's gain."  
From that picture we turn with a thankful grace,  
That we've even a school-girl in baby's place.

God pity that mother whose years have flown,  
Whose children are scattered, and she alone.  
How gladly that mother would call back the years—  
Filled, as they were, with trials and fears;  
Could she but be back with the racket and noise  
Made by her own little girls and boys.